

William Warfield per 6/23d

1717

SERMON

Preach'd at

WHITE-HALL;

Before Their EXCELLENCIES the

Lords Justices of *England*:

Upon Sunday *July* the 12th, 1701.

By *RICHARD WILLIS*, D.D.

Chaplain in Ordinary to His MAJESTY,
and Late Subpræceptor to His Highness
the Duke of Gloucester.

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Prov. XII. xxvi.

The Righteous is more excellent than his Neighbour : but the way of the wicked seduceth them.

NEXT to the great Considerations of the other World, there is nothing that should more recommend Vertue and Religion to us than this, that they are in themselves noble and excellent things, that they improve, and adorn, and exalt our Natures : Whereas all Vice is base and degenerate and mean.

The great ground of our Obedience is indeed the Authority of God ; and the great Motives to it are the considerations of Eternity : But there is besides these a great difference in the Nature of the things themselves, which as it is the reason why God was pleased to command the one, and forbid the other, so it is it self a Consideration which should engage us to the love of Vertue, that this will make us noble and excellent Creatures, like to the great God, and those holy Spirits that attend him ; whereas Sin will debase our Natures,

tures, make us like those apostate Spirits that fell from God the great Fountain of Life and Perfection ; or at best it will make us like *the beasts that perish.*

In Order to represent this matter to your Consideration, I have made choice of these Words of the Wise Man , *The Righteous is more excellent than his Neighbour : but the way of the wicked seduceth them.*

The former part of the words is plain and needs no Comment : but the meaning of the latter seems to be this ; that tho' Righteousness, and Piety, and Religion are excellent things, so that Men can hardly avoid seeing the beauty and loveliness of them, yet the deceitfulness of Sin will be apt to delude them, and find out some pretence or excuse to carry Men against their best reason, and what they know is fittest to be done. Or else the meaning may be this, that Goodness is the true Greatness : but that Sin befools Men with false and deceitful promises, and that there is nothing to be had from it but Vanity and Delusion.

Which of these is the true sense of the words it is not very material to enquire, they being both very true, and both denoting to us the excel-

excellency of a Religious Life above a Life of Sin and Wickedness, which is what I would endeavour at present to make out to you from the following Considerations.

I. The First is this, that God himself has put a great many marks of honour upon Righteousness and Goodness: and on the other side great marks, not only of hatred, but of contempt and scorn both upon Sin and Sinners. And it's God who is the great Fountain of honour, and who certainly knows best the nature of things. That Person or that thing must be honourable, which God is pleased to honour; and that must be despicable, which he despises

He that fears God, and does his duty, tho' he be in never so mean circumstances in the World, yet has the honour to be *the Servant of the most High God*; and that relation ought to make him honourable.

Nay further, He is not only *the Servant* of God; but he is *the Friend* of God; and *the Friend* of Jesus Christ. *Ye are my friends*, says our Saviour, *if ye do whatsoever I command you.* ^{John 15. 14.}

But further yet, God is not only pleased to own them for his *Servants* and his *Friends*, but

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also

1 John 3. also for his *Sons* and *Children*. Now are we the
 2. *Sons of God*, says St. John, but it does not yet ap-
 pear what we shall be: but this we know, that when
 he shall appear we shall be like him; that is,
 God has at present given us the honour to be
 his *Sons*; but what that Glory is which he
 has reserved for us in the other World, that
 we don't yet know; but so much we do know
 of it, that we shall then be like Jesus Christ.
 It would be high presumption for the greatest
 Monarch upon earth to assume these titles to
 himself, which yet God is pleased to give to
 the meanest Person who does but fear and
 serve him. And as God is pleased in this
 manner to own, and take notice of them, so
 2 Pet. 1. 4. accordingly he has given them many *great and*
precious promises; that he will have an especial
 care and providence over them; that he will
 hear their Prayers; that all things which be-
 fall them here shall work together for their
 good; and that after this short life is ended,
 he will make them happy with himself for
 ever. In a word, good Men are in an espe-
 2 Pet. 1. 4. cial manner *partakers of the Divine Nature*; their
Souls are honoured and blessed with the Com-
 munion of God, and the good influences of
 Heaven, and their *Bodies are the Temples of the*
Holy

Holy Ghost. These are great and glorious privileges wherewith God is pleased to honour them. But on the other side, tho' a Person be never so great in the World, yet if he be wicked, he is a very mean and contemptible Creature in the sight of God, who is not prejudiced, as we often are, by a gay outside, but can see the Soul poor and destitute through all that disguise. It is true of such a Person, what is taken notice of to the Church of *Lao-dicea*, *Thou saiest thou art rich and increased with goods, and hast need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.* Rev. 3. 17. This is indeed the condition of all those that live in Sin; they have poor wretched Souls, which have nothing that is truly great or lovely in them; they are Aliens from God, in a state of enmity with him; they are Strangers to the Divine Life, Slaves to the Devil, and to a great many, it may be contradictory, Lusts; they are without Light and Understanding, without Wisdom and Consideration; full of Guilt and defilement at present, and training up to a sad Eternity. This is the account which God himself gives us in the Scriptures of the different states of good and bad Men; and certainly

ly according to this, whatever difference there may be otherwise in their Conditions, the words of my Text are fully verified, That *the Righteous is more excellent than his Neighbour.*

II. The next Consideration I would propose is this, that we have not only the judgment of God in this matter, which yet certainly ought to be sufficient to persuade us ; but we have in a manner the judgment of all mankind ; not only of the good and virtuous, but of the greatest part even of wicked Men. For tho' there are too many that will follow their Lusts and their Appetites, whatever remonstrance their Consciences can make to the contrary, yet there are very few who sin so far as to approve even of what they do themselves, or to lose an honourable sense of Piety and Religion. Nay those that have gone so far as to dispute against some of the great Vertues of the Christian Religion, yet don't deny that they are noble and excellent things ; that if we had but that Chastity and Purity, that Resignation to God, and Love to Men, which the Christian Religion requires from us, it would make us noble Creatures ; But what they pretend is, that these Vertues are above
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the attainment of the present imperfect state of Human Nature. There is indeed some difficulty in it, as there is in every thing else that is excellent ; But it is not my business at present to take notice of that, but only to observe, that God has impressed such characters of Beauty and Loveliness upon Vertue, that even a Libertine can hardly sin away the sense of it ; to confirm which we may further take notice of these following particulars.

1. We may observe that almost all Nations in all Ages of the World, however they may have differed as to the measures of some Vertues and Vices, yet have agreed as to the main and great points of Duty ; which I can impute to nothing else, but the natural beauty and excellency of Vertue, and the deformity of Vice, which will as naturally appear, when fairly represented to a Soul not quite corrupted, as our Eyes or Ears, when sound and in good order, will discern what we see or hear. And this I take to be the true reason why, notwithstanding the passions and interests of Men, and that many Vertues as to their degrees and measures admit of disputes as much as any thing else, yet that Vertue it self has not been disputed out of the World.

World. Not but that there is a reason to be given for every thing which God has made our duty, and more especially for natural duties ; But the Body of mankind I am afraid were not made to be nice Reasoners in these matters, any more than they are in others : And yet we find by experience that they do generally discern betwixt good and evil ; they see a beauty in the one, and a deformity and ugliness in the other, which does often direct them when they can't dispute about it.

2. We may observe that when Men will to serve any Interest or Appetite go against the rules of their Duty, they generally endeavour to conceal it, are unwilling to have it known, and think it for their honour to disguise the matter as much as they can. It is the Observation of an Author otherwise loose enough, That *Hypocrisie is a homage that Vice pays to Vertue*, and 'tis a sign, that tho' Men won't be at the trouble to practise it, yet they have an honourable opinion of it, when they desire to appear under its Garb. But we may further observe that Vice, tho' disguised and concealed from the World, is so ugly a thing, that few People can bear the sense of it themselves ; and therefore most who are guilty of
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it are at as much pains to find out some colour or excuse, wherewith to deceive themselves, as they are to conceal it from others, which is a plain evidence that they do at least think well of Vertue, and that they would be very glad to think themselves to be virtuous; and that Vice, when it is open and barefaced, is so deformed a thing that few Peoples Consciences can be easie under it.

3. We may observe that when Men come to be downright Libertines, and so can't cover their shame either from the World, or from themselves, then they have commonly no other way to be easie under the apprehension of it, but by endeavouring to blacken the rest of the World; which is another sort of *Homage* that Men pay to *Vertue* when perhaps they don't think of it. For it can hardly be imagined, why Men should be so solicitous, as some are, to persuade themselves and others that there is no such thing as an honest and good Man, but that they can't bear the thoughts of being deformed alone: or that there should be any Persons so much more noble and excellent than themselves, as true Piety and Religion would make them.

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4. We may observe that tho' Men will indulge their own Appetites, and sacrifice their Consciences to them; yet they desire that their Children and Relations, and those whom they love, may be good and vertuous. There are none but those whom they mis-cal their Friends, whom they desire to have as bad as themselves. And even as to themselves too, when the delusion is a little over, when misfortune, or sickness, or a nearer prospect of another World has opened their Eyes, then none speak or think so much of the folly and madness of Sin as they.

III. Another thing that shews us the excellency of Religion is, that it tends to make our minds free and easie, to give us confidence towards God, and peace in our own Breasts, to set our Souls at liberty from the tyranny of hurtful Lusts and Passions, and to fill us with joy and good hope in every condition of Life. These are great advantages which Religion offers to us; and if every one who pretends to it do not reap all these Blessings from it, as we find by sad experience they do not, 'tis generally either because their Religion is only pretended; or because they

they content themselves with a very small degree of it, which is not sufficient to conquer their Corruptions, or to give them a comfortable hope of the Favour of God. But Religion, if thoroughly imbibed, has a direct natural tendency to procure all these Blessings for us: whereas on the other side Vice and Wickedness are apt to fill our Souls with guilt and horror, and sad expectations; they not only corrupt, but enslave our minds; so that every Man who lives in Sin, however he may carry it big and look high in the World, yet is in truth but a Slave. St. Paul tells us, *That He who commits sin is the Servant of Sin.* And that is one of the worst sorts of Slavery, to be a Slave to a mean Lust or Passion, which shall drag a Man contrary to his Reason and Conscience, not only to what he sees dishonourable to God, and prejudicial to his Soul, but very often to what is against his interest in this World. It were easie to shew how each Sin in particular enslaves Men. Pride, Ambition, Envy, Lust, Covetousness, are heavy and tyrannical Masters; heavy, tho' they would be contented to command by turns; but the worst is, they will be often for commanding all at once, and

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rack the poor Creature to gratifie contradictory Appetites, which neither will nor can be gratified together.

When a Man ventures to break the Commands of God, tho' he may promise to himself a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction, yet he is generally plunged by it into abundance of Troubles and Perplexities. It's a great while it may be, before he can bring his Conscience over; which at last may not be so far brought over, but that it will every now and then make such Remonstrances, as will spoil most of his Satisfaction. After that, his next care must be about his Reputation; which may be lost, if the thing come to be known. And this must often make him a Slave to a great many People, it may be to his own Servants: Or else engages him on in further Wickedness, which he has no mind to, which yet must be done to please People; or to keep the other secret. By this time it may be Sin has got the dominion over him, and will carry him to all the Extravagancies in the World; tho' never so much against his Honour or his Interest. And now he is gone so far, he is so ugly a sight, that he is afraid of himself, and is forced to continue the Mad-
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ness, for fear serious Thoughts should come into his Head. And yet the great Pretence of these People is Liberty. But in truth, if this be not Slavery, there is no such thing as Slavery in the World. Is not he a Slave, who does what he knowes to be absurd and foolish? Is not he Slave, who meanly follows his Appetites, when all the while his reason reproaches him? Is not he a Slave, who is afraid of himself, and afraid of thinking? Is not he a Slave, who cannot with any confidence lift up his Eyes to Heaven, or beg the protection of God? nay who is in constant danger of his Judgments, who does not know, when he lies down to sleep, but that God may arrest him before Morning, and bring him before his great Tribunal to give an account of himself? But if he be so much a Slave here, what shall he be when is actually entered upon his Eternal State? When he shall find himself in the company, and under the dominion of those wicked Spirits, by whom he was guided in this World? When he shall see himself with them *reserved under chains of darkness to the judgment of the great* 2 Pet. 2. 4. Jud. 6. day? But above all, what a Slave will he be, when he must be dragged before that great
C 2 Tribunal

Tribunal, and be set upon the left hand of Christ, and receive that dreadful sentence, *Go ye cursed into everlasting Fire*, and when that sad sentence must be executed upon him? I am satisfied I need urge this matter no further. Those that do believe there is another State, in which we are to live after we have left this World, cannot but be sensible of the misery and slavery which Sin is then like to bring; but what I would observe at present is, that the fears and apprehensions of this sad State, which will every now and then break in upon Sinners do what they can, must very much inflave their minds while they live here.

IV. Another Consideration I would propose is this, that Piety and Vertue make every thing else great and of good use which a Man has, or that happens to him: whereas Sin and Wickedness tend to corrupt and spoil every thing. There is no Condition but what to a good Man may serve to very good ends and purposes; whether he be high or low in the World, whether in prosperity or adversity, there is still matter for his Vertue to work upon. If he be in Affliction, then
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Patience, and Humility, and Resignation to the Will of God will make him a great Man in that; and some of the greatest Men we have had in all Ages of the World, have been those who have thus improved the severer dispensations of the Providence of God. But on the other side, if God be pleased to put him in a high Station, Integrity, Sobriety, and a Publick Spirit will add to the greatness of his Condition, make him a publick Blessing, and such a Person will bring more honour to the Station he is in, than he will receive from it. But Wickedness makes every State mean and contemptible. There is nothing more despicable than a Person who joyns a vileness of Soul to the meaness of his condition: On the other side, a great Place, or great Riches, are Snares and Temptations in the way of a wicked Man, and minister often to Folly and Vanity and Vice; make him more Proud, more Oppressive, more Luxurious, raise his Passions, and corrupt his Soul, and make him a greater and a more publick Evil than otherwise he would be. In a word, there are scarce any of those things which make Men valued in the World, but joyned with Religion become more honourable, and
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more useful ; and when separated from it, at least loose much of their value, if they don't become downright hurtful.

V. Another Consideration I would propose is, that all Sin is Injustice, which is by every body looked upon to be a mean base thing. It is a common matter of excuse in a great many Persons for other defects, that they do no body any harm, that they are just and honest in their dealings, and therefore they hope that God will overlook other things ; by which however they confess, that Injustice is so base a thing, that it's a shame to own it, and that no excuse is to be made for it. But that which I would at present take notice of is, that we are as much bound in common Justice and Honesty to other parts of our Duty, as to those towards our Neighbour. It is a saying of *Tully*, that *Piety is justice toward God*, and therefore Impiety and Disobedience must be Injustice. Nay it is the basest and worst sort of Injustice, *Ingratitude*. As for our Neighbours, we are generally upon the level with them, owe them no more than they owe us ; and so to do them no harm will satisfy all the Obligations which

which strict justice requires from us : But the case is very different betwixt God and us. God is our Creator and our Father, He gave us our being, and 'tis He who constantly preserves us in it, and who gives us all the good things we enjoy in the World ; and therefore to be wanting in our Duty to him , not to Worship, and Praise, and Adore him ; not to obey what he requires of us, and not to do him what service we can in the World, is black Ingratitude and Injustice, and as much against *common Honesty* as it is against *Piety*. We cannot indeed do God any good or harm, as we may do to one another, the Infinite Perfection of his Nature puts him above any thing of this kind : But we may do what may *please* or *displease* him ; we may do what may shew a sense of his Favours ; and therefore those who neglect this, must either say, that God did not make them, or that he never did them any good, or else they cannot excuse themselves from the basest Injustice ; and such Persons can no more pretend to the title of *honest Men*, than they can to that of *good and devout Christians*.

VI. The last thing I would propose to your
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Consideration is this, that the highest end which can be pretended to by any Vice, is only the procuring some Pleasure or Convenience for our selves, in our passage through this World, which we all know cannot be very long, and therefore whatever relates to it cannot be of any great consequence. Could a Man be sure of all the pleasure or advantage which can be proposed in the ways of Sin, yet Twenty, or Thirty, or Forty Years will soon be over, and then there's an end of all these things for ever; there's nothing beyond that he can pretend to, or hope for; and this is but a poor thing if compared to Eternity.

The Scripture reckons it as a great advantage of the good Man, that *he has hope in his death*; that he has a comfortable prospect before him when this short Scene of things must be ended; and this is what may support him, and make him live cheerfully in any condition in the mean time: Whereas the best thing that a wicked Man can hope for is, that there may be then an end of him, that his Soul may die with his Body; and if he could be sure even of this, it might prevent a great many sad melancholy Doubts and Fears; for that is better than going to Hell, which is the reason
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that so many wicked Men are apt to make it their refuge, and to support themselves with the thoughts of it, as well as they can, against the Apprehensions of a sad Eternity. But what a poor happiness is this, if a Man could be sure of it? What a mean thing is it to one that has any regard to the dignity of his nature? Is it for this that they account themselves the only wise and happy Men, the only Persons that know how to live? It is certainly a very low and contemptible state, to have no higher design than to pamper and keep up a poor body, which do what they can will soon be gone, and then all their happiness must be gone with it, and they must be lodged in the Grave as senseless as the ground they are laid into, and in a little time not to be distinguished from it, and then there is an end of them for ever. And yet the Sinner can hope for nothing else, but either this, or else to go and appear before God, and to receive in the other World according to what he has done in this. That will indeed be the state to which he must come; but that is a more melancholy Consideration than the other, that he can't tell but when he has been like the Rich Man in the Gospel, *faring sumptuously every day*, indulging his body, and forgetting his Soul, he

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may

may soon fall into this sad Condition. That may be, and very quickly be, and then it will be past all dispute which was the wiser and greater Man, he that took care to live like a Man and a Christian, in order to secure a happy Eternity; or he that was resolved, come what would, he would have his portion in this life.

I have now done with that which I at first propos'd to speak to. Give me leave to make one or two short Inferences, and so I shall conclude.

I. Since Religion is in it self so excellent a thing, this should encourage good Men to persist in doing their duty, not to be ashamed either of the Profession or the Practice of Religion, notwithstanding any raileries or reproaches they may meet with upon that account from the lewder part of mankind. It becomes them to be ashamed of what they do, who are sensible that they are engaged in works of darkness, who go against their Reason and their Conscience, and who know what they do to be absurd and foolish; such Persons have indeed reason to sneak, and to be ashamed of themselves and their Actions: But he that acts upon Principles, upon such Principles as all the World will approve of one time or other, ought to own what he does, and to stand to it. Good Men
have

have these great Encouragements to persist in the ways of God, whatever Censure they may meet with; that in the *first* place, they will certainly approve themselves to God in what they do; which is of much more consequence to us, than to approve our selves to all the World besides; for God best knows the nature of Things, and it is by his Judgment that we must all of us finally stand or fall.

Again, *Secondly*, We shall approve our selves to our own Reason and Conscience; which, next to the approbation of God, ought to be most dear and valuable to us. No Mans Conscience ever reproached him for doing his duty, and acting like an honest and good Man: but it will reproach him, and fly in his face, when he follows his Lusts or his Interest, or his Companions in Sin, whatever applauses he may meet with from them.

Thirdly, We shall approve our selves to all Wise and Considerate Persons at present, to all those that act or think according to the true nature and value of things; and certainly their Judgment ought to be valued before that of a company of inconsiderate People, who never think soberly, or if they do come to think, must likewise approve of what we do. But however this matter may be at present, it is but waiting a little while, and all the World will justify the wisdom of our choice, even those who may at present seem most to slight or ridicule it; when a nearer prospect of Eternity comes to open their Eyes, and represents things to them in their true light, then they will be as sensible as any, that there is no folly like to living in Sin, and no Wisdom like to a serious and an early Piety.

II. The chief use I would make of what has been said about the Excellency of Religion, is from thence to persuade all that hear me to the love and practice of it; that
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we would be more concerned and solicitous to attain that which will exalt our Natures, make us noble Creatures, and dear to God, than to make our selves high or honourable in the World. We may have all the honour and greatness the World can give us, and yet be very mean contemptible Creatures in the sight of God; we may with it all be unhappy here, and, what is worse, be unhappy for ever: But Piety, and Vertue, and the Fear of God, if thoroughly entertain'd, will make us truly great, and as happy as this mortal state will admit of; and lay a foundation of eternal Happiness for us when we must go from hence, as we all must in a little time. If we can indeed, consistent with our Duty pass great and honourable through the World, we have reason to be thankful for it: but if not, we have reason to do our Duty however, and be contented. There is nothing that befalls us here can be of any very great consequence to us, because, be it what it will, we must suddenly leave it, and enter upon a new Scene, where all these things will signifie nothing. Had we lived but a few Years ago, it had by this time been no matter whether we had lived high in the World, or had been forced to beg our bread; because all that had now been over: and a few Years hence it will be as little matter what we are now; for we shall be in our Graves, where the Poor and the Rich, the Noble and the Ignoble are all equal, and there will be no other difference betwixt Men, but what is made by the piety of their Lives. Let us then resolve that whatever it costs us we will approve our selves to the Great God, and do what is honourable in his sight, and what will bear the Test when we come to Judgment; But for every thing else let this be our great Rule, so to mind the things that are Temporal, that we finally loose not the things that are Eternal.

F I N I S.